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History and Criticism of the Tragic Hero

James Donald Kirkham

HISTORY AND CRITICISM OF THE TRAGIC HERO

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James Donald Kirkham

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PURPOSE

There is a two-fold purpose in writing this paper. First, it will attempt to present a brief history of criticism dealing with the concepts of the tragic hero. Second, it is an attempt to show the changing concepts of criticism as applied to modern drama. A modern play, Death of a Salesman, by Arthur Miller, was chosen because of the controversial nature of its hero, Willy Loman. Willy Loman has been called a tragic hero by many and a non-tragic hero by just as many others. It is hoped in this paper the concepts of ancient and modern tragedy show Willy to be a tragic hero. The standards, however, have evolved from the ancient criticism to modern standards.

First, a brief history of criticism is presented to serve as a background for showing contemporary concepts of tragedy. The history covers the periods from Greek drama, where the first great tragedies appeared, to contemporary standards from America and the Western World. The changing views on this subject can be observed as the theories brought forth from the preceding centuries are noted.

Secondly, the paper deals with the controversial character of Willy himself. Over twenty reviews and criticisms were observed of this play that opened in 1949, in New York City. Also many articles dealt with this controversial subject of the modern tragic figure, both praising and condemning him.

Finally, the contemporary concept of the hero will be compared with the ancient ideas through this character. Willy Loman will be analyzed according to modern standards. At the same time it will be shown how the modern standards evolved from the earlier ones established by Aristotle and other noted critics in history.

Trying to determine the tragic influence of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman will be difficult unless the past is reviewed for any clues leading to the nature of this hero. The early beginning of tragedy and drama itself must be investigated to bring into focus a starting point. Before the time of the first treatises written on the subject of tragedy by Aristotle, the elements of tragedy were largely left to the dramatists themselves. Each playwright formulated his own ideas on this subject as no rules were expressed. To most of the playwrights, it can be assumed, the tragic hero was one who would not accept the will of the gods, and his downfall occurred because of this misconception. For example, in the Illiad there is from the beginning to the end a somber remembrance of mortality: "The generations of man are like the leaves in the forest."[1] Thus no man could excape his fate. Achilles, one of the great tragic heroes, summed up perhaps the dramatists' feelings towards the tragic moral: "This is the way the gods have spun their webs for poor mortals. Our life is all sorrow, but they are untroubled themselves."[2] The Greek playwright, Homer, related his theory of tragedy, maintaining the idea of a great man must fall to his destruction: "Because they had the lawful power, heroes and gods alike were not held too high, impersonal standards of right and wrong. Their will was the law.... Homer displayed no concern

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[1]Herbert S. Muller, The Spirit of Tragedy, (New York: Alfred Knopf; 1956), p. 38.

[2]Ibid.

over the tragic lot of the common man.[3] Each Greek playwright had his own conception of the tragic hero. Aeschylus, one of the earliest Greek dramatists, conceived the hero as one who has been wronged by the gods. In the Suppliants, the king is faced with a tragic choice that is not of his making. Promethius Bound is another example of Aeschylus' tragedy. "No one could condone the behavior of Zeus except readers brought up in the belief that a God of love sentences his enemies to an eternity of torture in hell."[4] Although Promethius is too proud and defiant, he is exploited: "Behold me, I am wronged!"[5]

"Yet, the heroes of Sophocles live by a different code."[6] He treated the heroes with some respect. He did not condemn their pride, as did Aeschylus, "unless, as in Creon of Antigone, it is purely selfish or tyrannical."[7] The gods played a lesser role in his tragedies.

The Poetica of Aristotle was the earliest critical treatises dealing with the dramatic theory. This work was published, as best judged, between 360-322 B.C.[8] He took many of his ideas from the Greek tragedies for illustrations. With the exception, perhaps, of the definition of tragedy, probably no passage in his work has given rise to so much criticism as his description of the tragic hero: "The qualities requisite to such

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[3]Ibid. p. 41.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid. p. 73.

[6]Ibid. p. 96.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Barrett H. Clark, European Theories of the Drama, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1947), p. 5.

a character are here deduced from the primary fact that the function of tragedy is to produce the katharsis of pity and fear; pity being felt for a person, who if not wholly innocent, meets with suffering beyond deserts; fear being awakened when the sufferer is a man of like nature with ourselves."[9] He maintained there are three forms of plot to be avoided: First, "a good man must not be seen passing from happiness to misery. The idea of a man who is eminently good that undergoes complete destruction awakens neither pity or fear, it shocks us."[10] Second, "a bad man must not pass from misery to happiness. The idea of an evil person who has gained fortune does not awaken fear. Even the sense of justice is unsatisfied. Third, an extremely evil man should not fall into misery. This, although justice, is lacking in higher tragic elements."[11]

Aristotle gave four points to aim for in tragic characterization: (1) They should be good. They should represent a kind of goodness. (2) The characters should be appropriate. If a character is a man, he should have manly qualities. (3) They should be real and believable. (4) The characters should be made consistent throughout.[12]

According to Aristotle, the tragic hero should be "an intermediate kind of personage, a man not predominantly virtuous and just, but his misfortune is not brought upon him by vice and depravity; but by some

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[9]S. H. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, (London: Mascmillan & Company, 1907), p. 302.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Richard McKeon, The Basic Works of Aristotle (New York: Random House, 1941), pp. 1469-70.

error of judgment."[13] Aristotle maintained the tragic hero should be illustrious in rank and fortune. To him the good man may be represented as passing from adversity to prosperity. This would fail to produce a tragic effect and is not considered good tragedy. However, Aristotle observed such a play that "owing to the weakness of the audience such a play often passes for the best."[14]

Looking at Aristotle's condition of the tragic hero more closely, it seemed the blameless character was deemed unfit for a tragic hero on the approach that unwarranted pity or fear causes repulsion instead of sympathy. In this case he said, pity is expelled by stronger feelings. The sense of outraged justice would displace the softer emotion.[15] This unqualified rejection of a guiltless hero surprised some critics as it did S. H. Butcher in his book, Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art. He maintained Aristotle could go back to the Greek stage to find a good example in Antigone. Should she suffer for a penalty? She was so placed that she had to choose between conflicting duties; but who could doubt that she was right? "Her's was a 'sinless' crime, nor could Aristotle, on his own principles, call her other than good in the fullest sense of the word."[16] It seemed however, that Aristotle's reluctance to admit a perfect character was almost justified by the history of tragic drama in that such a character was rarely chosen.

Aristotle's idea that the tragic hero should be composed of mixed

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[13] Møller, p. 7.

[14] Butcher, p. 305

[15] Ibid., p. 309

[16] Ibid., p. 310

elements, seemed to show he is a man like ourselves. That is, a person as mediocre virtues and average powers. He did not go into any detail in this. As it was we, "arrive at the result that the tragic hero is a man of noble nature, however, he has so large a share of our common humanity as to enlist our eager interest and sympathy."[17]

This character feels from a position of lofty prominence by some error. This error could be one of judgment, arising from a hasty or careless view of his case. This also covered error due to unavoidable ignorance, which brings in the question, "Is a man responsible for his ignorance?" This also covers errors committed in anger or passion. In any case, "No faulty, faultless hero, anymore than a consummate villian, can inspire so vital a sympathy as the hero whose weakness and whose strength alike bring him within the range of a common humanity."[18]

After Aristotle's contribution to the theory of dramatic art, there was a long period of time when no new contributions of the subject were advanced. It was not until 24-20 B. C. when a Roman, Quintus Horatius Flaccus, better known as Horace, advanced further convictions on the tragic hero. His Art of Poetry, his greatest work, is in the whole a somewhat arbitrary manual. The greatest importance is attached to his formal style of writing. However, Horace's doctrine of pleasure and profit was to be repeated a number of times, and is still a criterion of criticism.[19]

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[17] Ibid., p. 313

[18] Ibid., p. 333

[19] Barret H. Clark, European Theories of the Drama (New York: Crown Publishers; 1947), p. 28

In his work he, too, mentioned that a tragic character should remain consistent throughout. He said of this: "Let it be preserved to the last as it is set out in the beginning, and be consistent with itself."[20]

There was another absence of any great theory of tragedy from Aristotle and Horace until the Middle Ages in history. The greater part of the contributions were little more than repetitions of the ideas of these two men.[21]

The first Englishman to mention Aristotle's Poetica was Roger Bacon (1214-1294). His study, however, was more concerned with the scientific theories of Aristotle, rather than literary. During this time, dramatic criticism was little known. Even Aristotle and his contribution was known to few. Tully, a writer of this period, said in his essay, "Topics", "Aristotle was known to a very few....Therefore, almost nothing worthy is known of the philosophy of Aristotle, and so far there have been but three who have been able truly to judge about the few books already translated."[22] Chaucer, one of the great writers, in his Canterbury Tales, written in the five years between 1381 and 1386 mentioned the tragic theory:[23]

> Tragedie is to sayn a certain storie,
> As olde books maken us memorie,
> Of him that stood in great prosperitee,
> And is yfallen out of high degree
> In to miserie, and endeth wretchedly."[24]

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[20] Ibid., p. 31.

[21] Ibid., p. 41.

[22] Marvin Herrick, Poetics of Aristotle in England (New Haven: Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 8.

[23] Chambers Cyclopaedia of English Literature (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippencott Company, 1938), p. 64.

[24] Ibid.

The Italian Renaissance brought with it a rebirth of art and literature and was considered by many as the starting point of modern literary criticism. Antonio Minturno in his essay, "The Art of Poetry", written in 1563, explained the plight of the tragic hero in relation to the poet and his ideas of tragedy. "The tragic poet," he said, "creates before our eyes an image of life, showing us the behavior of those, who, remarkable among men for their positions and the favors of fortune, have fallen into extreme misery through human error."[25] This was a recapitulation of the idea of the "tragic flaw or error" of Aristotle.

Julius Caesar Scaliger, another critic from the Italian Renaissance, gave his definition of the tragic hero in his essay, "Poetics", written 1561: "Although tragedy resembles epic poetry, it differs in that it rarely introduces persons of lower classes, such as messengers, merchants, sailors, and the like....The matters of tragedy are great and terrible, as commands of kings, slaughters, despair, suicide, exile, bereavements, parricides, putting out the eyes, weeping, wailing, eulogies, and dirges."[26]

Lodovico Castelvetro, another Italian critic, was born in 1505. In his essay he translated the works of Aristotle into an understandable form in "Miscellaneous Critical Works", printed in 1797. "Tragedy," he said, "without a sad ending cannot excite, as experience shows, pity or fear."[27] Therefore, the tragic character or hero should fall upon an unhappy ending in order to excite the emotions. He went on to say, "Character is not part of the action, yet it accompanies it inseparably,

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[25]Clark, p. 58.

[26]Ibid., p. 61.

[27]Ibid., p. 65.

being revealed with the action. Hence, character ought not be considered as separate of the action, for without it the action would not be performed."[28]

In France, as well as Italy, there grew an interest in dramatic criticism. Jean De La Taille, born in France in 1540, wrote his criticism, "The Art of Tragedy", which followed closely to that of Aristotle in his interpretation of the tragic hero. He said, "The down fall of the tragic hero should not be the result of one's just dessert. Such occurrences do not move us. The tragedy should not treat very bad lords, who deserve punishment for their horrible crimes, or should they be wholly good men of pure and upright lives."[29]

In England during the Renaissance, Aristotle and his ideas once again became more popular. Sir Philip Sidney wrote an essay on this subject. His only work concerned with drama, his "Defence of Poesy", was written in all probability in 1581 as a reply to Gasson's The School of Abuse, a Puritan attack on plays. It must be remembered that this treatise was written before the great Elizabethan era, and his judgments were based upon beliefs produced by such minds as Aristotle, and much of his treatise revealed the Aristolic influence upon him; "Tragedy," he claimed, "openeth the greatest wounds and showeth forth ulcers that are covered with tissue; that maketh kings fear to be tyrants."[30] Therefore, although the tragic character was not dealt with in any great detail, he was brought into sharp focus to be reviewed by critics and philosophers in their interpretation of his ideas; however, no real new ideas on tragedy were expressed.

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., p. 77.

[30] Herrick, p. 27.

Especially during the Elizabethan period in England, did the drama and the drama critics flourish. Ben Johnson, one of the great essayists of that particular period, agreed with many of the ideas of Aristotle, especially with his concept of the tragic hero. He explained there should be unity in tragedy as did Aristotle. This unity he mentioned included characterization, accounting for the fact of consistency, emphasizing the ideas of Horace centuries earlier.[31]

Perhaps it is Shakespeare more than any other who brought the ideas of the tragic hero into focus in this period. The heroes of Shakespeare were all persons of high degree or members of great houses and families with few exceptions; Romeo of Romeo and Juliet should be noted as an exception to this rule. However, most of his characters were royalty, like Antony, Hamlet, and King Lear. Others were generals as was Othello. Shakespeare believed, as did the Greeks, that only the powerful or the great could be the subject of tragedy. His tragedies of the middle class domestic problems were few. Shakespeare also maintained there should be an internal conflict within the hero, perhaps adding to the Greek concept. This idea was noted in Hamlet and the internal struggle within himself deciding the fate of his uncle. Shakespeare believed, as did Aristotle, that the tragic heroes were dominated in some way or another by some unknown ruling passion. This could be interpreted as another form of the tragic flaw concept. It was noted that Shakespeare's heroes were usually their own enemies; this was noted in Macbeth. Almost always, however, the flaw was not necessarily a vicious blot, but it was a mere weakness that brought them to their destruction.[32]

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[31] Ibid., p. 44.

[32] Karl J. Holzknecht, The Backgrounds of Shakespeare's Plays (New York: American Book Company, 1950), pp. 331-336.

The tragic hero was the subject of many treatises in the seventeenth century. However, very few new concepts were advanced by the writers. Such works as Thomas Rymer's "Short View of Tragedy" written in 1692,[33] Samuel Johnson's "The Rambler" written in 1751,[34] Saint-Euremond's "Of Ancient and Modern Tragedy" written in 1672,[35] and Nicholas Bioleau-Despreaux in his "Art Poetique or Art of Poetry" written in 1674, presented the concepts of tragedy; however, they were not specifically noted to the tragic hero and were revisions of the contemporary standards of Ben Johnson and the other critics already mentioned. Other more explicit opinions were expressed by critics and poets as well. John Milton, for example, one of the great English poets, showed his tragic hero in Samson Agonistes. In this drama he brought out one point stressed by Aristotle relating to the hero; the hero should go through great suffering in his destruction. Through his characterization of Samson, Milton told of the heroes woes:

> My griefs not only pain me as a lingering
> Disease, but finding no redress, ferment
> And rage. Nor less than wounds immedicable
> Ramble and fester, and gangrene to black
> Mortification. Thoughts my tormentors
> Armed with deadly stings, mangle my
> Apprehensive, tenderest parts...to death's
> Benumbing opium as my only cure, thence
> Faintings, swoonings of despair, and sense
> Of heaven's desertion.[36]

These were deep woes and played upon the character to the extreme of contemplation of suicide. Others think that Milton followed Aristotle in the theory of the tragic flaw. Samson, for example, had the flaw of

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[33] Clark, pp. 205-210.

[34] Ibid., pp. 228-230.

[35] Ibid., pp. 164-171.

[36] Herrick, p. 51

garrulity or talking too much; the same garrulity which Samson agreed snared him. This idea was not carried to the extreme as was the case in the Greek productions.[37]

John Dryden (1631) contributed much to English literature in his poems, plays, and the simple style of his literary criticisms. His authority, opinions, and reactions were accepted by most during this period. In regard to tragedy and the idea of the tragic hero, he, too, agreed with the principles of Aristotle as to the unity of plot and the definition of tragedy. In his essay, "The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy" he accepted Aristotle's terms regarding the tragic hero. He condemned Shakespeare's historical plays which he said were: "Rather chronicles represented than tragedy."[38] In these plays he asserted there was no real suffering by one man alone. Countries were involved; this gave it a pageant flavor instead of a tragic drama. He went on to say the tragic hero, "cannot be supposed to consist of one particular virtue, vice, or passion only; but 'tis a composition of qualities which are not contrary to another in the same person....(he) ought to be such a man who has so much more of virtue in him than of vice, that he may be left amiable to the audience, which otherwise cannot have any concernment for his suffering."[39]

Joseph Addison, another poet of the seventeenth century, turned towards literary criticism and had some ideas concerning the nature of the tragic hero. In his essay "The Spectator" written in 1711, he criticized the tragic writers of this period because they were: "Possessed with a notion that when they represent a virtuous or innocent person in distress,

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Clark, p. 193.

[39] Ibid., p. 196-7.

they ought not to leave him until they have delivered him out of his troubles, or made him truimph over his enemies."[40] This he asserted was bad. According to him, the tragic hero should come to some unhappy ending to fill the requirements of a complete tragedy. He said that terror and misery leave a pleasant anquish in the minds of the audience; this was the factor that made the Greek tragedies what they were.

During the middle of the eighteenth century, there was a changing trend in at least one respect of the tragic hero; he suddenly began to transform from the royalty into the common man known to all the people. Pierre-Augustus Caron, better known as Beumarchais, a French writer and critic, wrote in 1767 an essay entitled Essay on the Serious Drama. In this essay he said that interest aroused in the spectators by the king and other pompous characters did not appeal to the heart any longer. He said they merely appealed to the vanity in that the audience was permitted to participate in the secrets of the estate. Often in such a drama that audience was glad to see the sorrow of the king because it brought him to their level. In the above essay he summed up, perhaps, the feelings of others as he explained about the king: "What do I care, I, a peaceful subject of the eighteenth century monarchy, for the revolution of Athens. There is nothing in that for me; no morality which is applicable to my needs."[41] Thus now the attention was being turned more directly towards the small, common man and his problems.

During the years from 1767 to the late nineteenth century, little was written about the idea of the tragic hero. Many essays, it was found,

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[40] Ibid., pp. 227, 228.

[41] Ibid., p. 305.

were devoted to the study of tragedy itself; however, little was noted of its hero. Such articles as Friedrick Von Schiller's "On Tragic Art" written in 1792,[42] and Samuel Coleridge's "Greek Drama" written in 1818,[43] were devoted only to the whole picture of tragedy, which remained very much as it was during the eighteenth century. The concept of the tragic hero was left alone until later when there appeared an article by Maurice Maeterlinck, another French writer. His article written in 1896 was "The Tragical in Everyday Life". In this he explained that tragedy often appeared in the smaller, less noble man. "To Everyman," he said, "it does happen, in his everyday experience, that some situation of deep seriousness has to be unraveled by words...what I say often counts for so little; but my presence, the attitude of my soul, my future, and my past...all this it is speaks to you at that tragic moment."[44]

In the modern concept of this hero there seemed to be disagreement in the tragedy of the common man. Many took the position of Aristotle and referred to the tragic hero as one who had achieved greatness before his downfall. Others, however, had taken their ideas from the changing concept of the little man being capable of experiencing tragedy. Joseph Wood Krutch, a member of the faculty at Columbia University, explained his reasoning in his essay "The Tragic Fallacy" written in 1929. "Modern critics," he said, "have sometimes been puzzled to account for the fact that the concern for ancient tragedy is almost exclusively with the kings and the courts...and they have sometimes regretted that Shakespeare didn't

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[42] Ibid., p. 320-322.

[43] Ibid., p. 423-425.

[44] Ibid., p. 413.

devote himself more than he did to the serious consideration of those common woes of the common man, which subsequent writers have explored with increasing pernacity."[45]

John Mason Brown, another American critic of the Saturday Review of Literature, wrote the "Tragic Blueprint" in 1940. In this treatise he said of the tragic hero: "We are kept warm in the presence of pain endured by those wounded men and women who are tragedy's favorite sons and daughters, and...we are able to attend their deaths without crying."[46] This idea of other characters not being able to cry at their deaths is especially noted in the funeral of Willy in Death of a Salesman.

In 1938, Maxwell Anderson wrote an essay entitled "Essence of Tragedy". In this he related his ideas which showed that be believed the hero could be a common man who became noble because of his recognition of his faults, not because of something attained by heredity. He also explained, "The hero who must make the central discovery must not be a perfect man. He must have variation of what Aristotle calls the tragic fault...the fault can be a very simple one--a mere unawareness...however, he must learn through suffering. In a tragedy he suffers death itself as a consequence of his fault."[47]

Both nations, The United States and England, had observed the change of taste about suitable characters for tragedy according to Ivor Brown in the New York Times Magazine. He maintained, "The classic hero, the Elizabethan hero had to be a man of might, power, and position. He fell

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[45] Ibid., p. 523.

[46] Ibid., p. 554.

[47] Ibid., p. 547.

because of some flaw in his character. The fall was greater if he was himself great. He was not a clown tumbling off his chair."[48] He went on to say that we now have what he termed "stool tragedies, not throne tragedies. It is the clerk, not the king, who inspires the tragedian; Loman, not Highman who throws Broadway into compassionate lamentation."[49]

Preston T. Roberts Jr., a faculty member of the University of Chicago, in his article "Bringing Pathos into Focus" written in 1954, said that the first and most distinquishing mark of modern plays is the pathos. "A Streetcar Named Desire and Death of a Salesman are typically modern plays distinquished by their absorption with what is pathetic or less than tragic and incapable of redemption in experience."[50]

There are others who express the idea of the common man not as the tragic hero, but as a pathetic person instead. This idea was summed up by Richard B. Sewall in his book, The Vision of Tragedy:

> This new tragic hero has not the satisfaction of a clear and present opponent, an unjust deity, a plague, a stricken city, ungratified daughters, an oppressive social and religious code, or a Moby Dick. He struggles not so much with a crisis as with a condition; and the condition is the contemporary confusion of values, and the dilemma is in his own soul. He does not shape events in bold strokes; rather events to a greater extent shape him...the tendency to call him pathetic rather than tragic; a victim rather than a hero.[51]

The preceding ideas seem to sum up the contemporary feelings about the tragic hero; we see them go to their destruction, and yet, we cannot

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[48]Ivor Brown, "As London Sees Willy Loman", New York Times Magazine, (August 28, 1949), p. 59.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Preston T. Roberts Jr., "Bringing Pathos into Focus", University of Chicago Magazine, (February, 1954), p. 7.

[51]Richard B. Sewall, The Vision of Tragedy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 110.

bring ourselves to extreme pity as is shown by Willy's wife in Death of a Salesman. We come to him and the study of a little man succombing to his environment rather than a great man destroyed by his greatness.

The basic innovations of the tragic hero have changed somewhat from the early development in Greece to modern concepts brought forth in the playwrights Miller, O'Neill, Williams, and others. The tragic hero should not be a perfect man falling to his destruction; an evil man must not pass from misery to happiness; the character should be consistent with himself; he should be believable; and he should come to an unhappy ending becoming better for his destruction. The tragic hero is usually dominated in some way by some ruling passion. They are their own enemies. These concepts have come from the ancient interpretation to present standards.

Some concepts, on the other hand, have changed as they passed through history. For example, the concept of rank has changed since Aristotle. In the beginning only those in high position were deemed tragic. However, this idea changed as the people became more interested in the problems of themselves. Today the hero is a pathetic hero rather than a tragic hero. We no longer believe in the concept that the gods play a large role in determining the nature of the tragic hero.

There are conflicting opinions today as to the nature of the tragic hero. Many believe that the standards set up by Aristotle and other earlier critics are final and refuse to believe, for example, that the common man could be tragic. Others, however, believe concepts have changed since then.

To show this conflicting opinion today, the play Death of a Salesman was chosen because of the controversial nature of its leading character, Willy Loman. After the opening night of Death of a Salesman in New York in 1949, a controversy began that has not been resolved at this writing.

Many pages and articles were devoted to the character of Willy, a character the nation will not soon forget. Articles following this opening were written by drama critics, psychologists, educators, religious leaders, physicians, and the author himself.

Basically, for expediency, the articles were divided into two categories: (1) those who believed Willy Loman was a tragic hero; and (2) those who believed he was not. Many reasons were given by both groups for their decisions. First, the group designating Willy as an example of a tragic hero was taken and their reasons were compared with those of the opposite opinion. The articles were further broken down in categories showing the tragic nature of Willy compared to the qualifications set by the ancient dramatists.

First, Aristotle's concept of the tragic flaw was discussed by many in relation to Willy in this drama. Dr. Daniel Schneider, author of the Psychoanalyst and the Artist has written a provocative introspection of Death of a Salesman. He compared Death of a Salesman to Hamlet in its deep level of insight which this play, like Hamlet achieves. He pointed out with the use of Willy's hallucinations and the "inner logic of this eruption volcanic unconscious, the play becomes a lucid experience."[52]

David Sievers pointed out that Willy Loman had several tragic faults that can be interpreted with Aristotle as belonging to the tragic hero. First, Willy was so ambivilant in his feelings, he became disarranged in his association with people. For example, Sievers pointed out Willy called his son, "a lazy bum" one minute and told his wife the very next minute that "He's not lazy!"[53] Another flaw pointed out by Sievers that

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[52]W. David Sievers, Freud on Broadway (New York: Hermitage House, 1955), p. 394.

[53]Ibid., p. 392

was given to Willy was clearly brought out in the play. His funeral was a quiet, little post script, to which no buyers swarmed, merely his sons, his wife, and Charley who knew the meaning of Willy's tragedy: "He had the wrong dreams, all, all, wrong....He never knew who he was."[54]

The concept of Willy's tragic flaw was discussed by others. Life Magazine, shortly after the opening, had an article dealing with the criticisms of Miller's play. One small paragraph was found to be significant in the argument: "Now Arthur Miller...shows how a good man can be destroyed by the 'wrong dreams' of a shallow, materialistic way of life."[55] They conceived his fault as being too materialistic. This idea was referred back to society as well as to the central character by Mr. Miller. The idea of Willy having the wrong dreams seemed to be his prominant fault. Miller, himself, and Joseph Krutch agreed on this principle. They pointed out Willy was intrigued by the wrong ideals. Material wealth and being "well liked" were the motivational factors in Willy's life. His dreams for the future were in reality dreams of the past. Life is not always rewarded by material gains as Willy thought it should. Cheating, lying, or stealing were accepted in order to accomplish this goal.

Another fault, not substantiated by others, however, perhaps might be the fact he was unable to face reality. When he found himself unable to cope with a life situation, he would digress into the past by repressing the situations disagreeable to him. This, however, is the writers opinion, and was not brought out by any of the others.

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[54] Ibid., p. 394.

[55] "Death of a Salesman," Life, XXVI (February 21, 1949), p. 115.

Daniel Schneider, M.D. in an article, "Play of Dreams" related another aspect of Willy's tragic flaw. "His son realizes in the end that his father, like Oedipus, is not a sexless god, but a sexual man, prone to every human temptation."[56] In this he referred to the scene in which Biff confronted his father in the act of adultry, which can be taken as another example of a weakness of character. Schneider went on to say that the play was a variation of Oedipus; Zeus, the Greek God pointed out, "He who pretends to god hood over me must fulfill his god hood or be revealed as a mad man."[57] Gilbert W. Gabriel, in an article in Theatre Arts summarized briefly Willy's tragic flaw in relation to his destruction:

> ...His relation with his two boys is tragic. His faith in- and faithlessness to- his wife is irreplaceable....His agonies are terrible enough to have been ripped from the Testaments and translated into the smeared print of a Red Book, and they are all the more terrible for being also, in large part, comical and picayune and-his own fault.[58]

Several weaknesses or tragic flaws, therefore, were attributed to Willy. He was inconsistent in his thoughts; he had the wrong ideals or goals; he was unable to face reality in a depressing situation; and he was unable to resist temptation placed before him. In this sense, at least, the play fulfills tragic requirements; Willy had many faults that brought him to his own destruction.

Probably the biggest argument in determining Willy as a tragic hero is concerned with his social rank. To many a tragic hero must be of a high social order to warrant horror in his destruction. On the

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[56]Daniel Schneider, M.D., "Play of Dreams", Theatre Arts Magazine, (October, 1949), p. 20.

[57]Ibid.

[58]Gilbert Gabriel, "Play Going", Theatre Arts Magazine, XXIII, (April, 1949), pp. 14-16.

other hand, there are many who answer this charge by showing that concepts have changed from the standards set by Aristotle. Arthur Miller, the central figure in this argument, pictured Willy Loman not as a king, but as the "kind of man you see muttering to himself on the subway, decently dressed, on his way to home or to the office, perfectly integrated with his surrounding excepting that unlike other people, he can no longer restrain the power of his experience from disrupting the superficial sociality of his behavior."[59]

The problem of Willy's stature was discussed by Miller:

> The play always seemed heroic to me, and in later years the Academy's charge that Willy lacked the 'stature' for the tragic hero seemed incredible to me. I had not understood that these matters are measured by Greco-Elizabethan paragraphs which hold no mention of insurance payments, front porches, refrigerator fan belts, steering knuckles, Chevrolets, and visions not seen through the portals of Delphi but in the blue flame of the hot water heater.[60]

Miller went on to attack those who believed that Willy was not a tragic hero because of the standards set by Aristotle and the ancient critics; he maintained that concepts have changed since then:

> Aristotle having spoken of a fall from the heights, it goes without saying that someone of the common mold cannot be in fact a tragic hero. It is now many centuries since Aristotle lived. There is no reason for falling down in a faint before his Poetics than before Euclid's geometry, which has been amended numerous times by men with new insights; nor for that matter, would I choose to have my illnesses diagnosed by Hippocrates rather than the most ordinary graduate of an American medical school, despite the Greek's genius. Things do change, and even a genius is limited by his time and the nature of his society.[61]

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[59] Arthur Miller, Collected Plays (New York: Viking Press, 1957), p. 25.

[60] Ibid., p. 31.

[61] Ibid., pp. 31-32.

Miller went on to say:

> The question of rank is significant to me only as it reflects the question of the social application of the hero's career. There is no doubt that if the character is shown on the stage who goes through the most ordinary actions, and is suddenly revealed as the President of the United States, his actions immediately assume a much greater magnitude than if he is the corner butcher. But, at the same time, his stature as a hero is not so utterly dependent upon his rank that the corner grocer cannot outdistance him as a tragic figure, providing of course, that the grocer's career engages the issues of, for instance, the survival of the race, the relationship of man to God, the questions in short, which define humanity and the right way to live so that home, instead of the battle ground or fog in which disembodied spirits pass each other in an endless twilight.[62]

Miller defended himself by stating that it is not important whether the hero is of stature or of common birth as long as there is importance to what he says or does:

> ...It matters not at all whether a modern play concerns itself with a grocer or a President of the intensity of the hero's commitment to his course is less than the maximum possible. It matters not at all whether this hero falls from a great height or a small one, whether he is highly conscious or dimly aware of what is happening.[63]

Others supported Miller on his view of the common man in relation to the tragic figure. Fortune Magazine, for example, in a review of Death of a Salesman, pointed out this fact and at the same time showed the universality of the play: "Nearly everyone who sees it can discover some quality of Willy and his sons that exists in himself and his friends and relatives. It is close identity between the audience and the characters that leads to the poignancy of the tragedy. It cannot be duplicated by a modern audience viewing the classical tragedies of the Greeks and the Elizabethans."[64]

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[62] Ibid., p. 32.

[63] Ibid., p. 33.

[64] "Death of a Salesman", Fortune, XXXIX(May, 1949), p. 80.

Euphemia Van Renssalaer Wyatt, in the Catholic World, brought out another point that was presented by some of the earlier critics already discussed; the idea of Willy's tragedy is no isolated story of a great man, and because the audience can identify him and his problems, the sadness and terror of his downfall becomes more unbearable to them.[65]

John Mason Brown in an article written in the Saturday Review of Literature, pointed out that Miller's play was modern and yet very personal. "Its central Figure," he said, "is a little man sentenced to discover his smallness rather than a big man undone by his greatness. Although he happens to be a salesman tested and found wanting by his own very crisis, all of us sitting out front are bound to be shaken, long before the evening is over, by finding something of ourselves in him."[66] He believed that the tragic elements of society can happen to the small man with as much force as a great man.

One of the strongest defenses on Miller's behalf in this controversy was presented by John Gassner, one of the leading modern drama critics. In an article in Forum Mr. Gassner stated that the plays of today have produced examples of "middle class tragedy". They are the kind that usually fall short of tragedy and settle on the lower level of mere pity. However, in his defense of Miller he said that this was not the case in Death of a Salesman: "Willy is not common place in his commonplaceness. He maintains his faith, inane though it may be, with a tenacity that is little short of heroic, but when it crumbles, the man crumbles with it...when he falls, we note the toppling of a giant."[67] In his final

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[65]Euphemia V. Wyatt, "The Drama", Catholic World CLXIX (April, 1949), p. 63.

[66]John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things", Saturday Review of Literature XXXII (February 26, 1949), p. 31.

[67]John Gassner, "Theatre Arts," Forum CXI, (April, 1949), pp. 219-221.

analysis Mr. Gassner noted the play is the form of a "burgeoise tragedy" rather than high tragedy.

This writer feels that the greatest defense of Willy was not given by a critic, but was given to him by his wife, Linda. In the play she told her sons the importance of Willy: "I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money; his name was never in the paper, and a terrible thing is happening to him...you don't have to be very smart to know what his trouble is: the man is exhausted. A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man."[68]

There were others, however, who disagreed with the small man pretending to be a tragic figure. They believed, as did Aristotle, that to be tragic, the hero must be great. For this reason alone, many people feel Willy falls short of being tragic.

Eric Bentley, a drama reviewer for the Theatre Arts Magazine, presented his view in the review of the play: "He (Miller) seems to place this as a social drama--the little man as the victim. The theme arouses pity, but no terror. Man here is too little and passive to play the tragic hero."[69] In this article, however, Mr. Bentley did not define his use of passive. If he meant that Willy was passive in his thoughts and refused to take action against his troubles, then, this writer submits, perhaps, Hamlet's flaw was often described as his inability to act against his problems, and this brought him to his destruction. Mr. Bentley was not explicit in his interpretation of "too little". It is hard to determine the degree to which he placed Willy.

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[68] Life, p. 121.

[69] Eric Bentley "Back to Broadway," Theatre Arts Magazine, (November, 1949), p. 13.

Another critic, George Jean Nathan, in an article in American Mercury answered the justification Arthur Miller gave to his play as being an example of tragedy. However, in the article he maintained Miller overlooked two things: First, he said, "Save the little man has something of a mind, which Mr. Miller's protagonist has not, his tragedy, while it may be deeply moving, is in finality without universal size and is like the experience we suffer in contemplating on the highway a run-over and killed dog. The tragedy is not that of a full human being but a mindless clod."[70] He went on to say that great tragedy is the tragedy of a man's mind in strong conflict with the stronger fates; "minor tragedy is that of a mindless man already beaten."[71]

The second argument brought out by Mr. Nathan is "the language in which the tragedy is written. The fall of kings calls for a splendor of prose and poetry, otherwise it may be quite as unimpressive as the fall of the little man. But the tragedy of the little man, to be impressive as that of a king, calls as well for such treatment....Common place language, though it may be exactly suited to the tragedy of the underdog, may make for first rate theatre, but scarcely for first-rate and overwhelming drama."[72]

In his defense of this position Mr. Nathan attacked Miller's argument that we are without kings and should follow the exploits of the common man: "We are not without kings, though they may not wear the royal

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[70]George Nathan, "The Theatre", American Mercury, LXVIII (June, 1949), p. 679.

[71]Ibid., pp. 679-80.

[72]Ibid., p. 680.

purple. We have men of heart and spirit and also of mind. They are or may be, the meat of important tragedy. The average man's, the common man's tragedy, save it be laid over and lifted above itself with the deceptive jewels of English speech can be no more in the temple of dramatic art than the pathetic picture of a loveable idiot lifting his small voice against the hurricane of the world."[73]

Perhaps, Mr. Nathan was a little ambiguous in his criticism of the play. One of the arguments of the play was the simple language in which the play was written. It is hard to determine what is simple language. Second, is the use of simple language detrimental to the play? This writer feels the language used in a play should emphasize the mood and the theme of the author. If the author's intent was to show a small man and the impact upon him, it goes without saying the language used should bring out this effect. This was one of the effective means of showing the characterization and the real tragedy of the Loman family. Of course, the language was not of a king; Willy Loman was not a king. Biff, his son, told Willy exactly what he was: "You were never anything but a hard working drummer who landed in the ash can like the rest of them."[74] It is in this light Willy must be viewed in order to bring out the tragic elements.

Mr. Nathan, himself, designated tragedy as, "a man's mind in strong conflict with the stronger fates." This is exactly what Mr. Miller presented in the play. What fate could be stronger than not being able to support a family financially and morally? It would be interesting to find out exactly what Mr. Nathan felt were the stronger fates.

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[73] Ibid.

[74] Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman.

There were similar reactions in Europe after the play's opening here. Ivor Brown, in an article in the New York Times Magazine expressed the feeling abroad; he called the play a "typical tragedy of a typical national figure."[75] He said there were no tears for Willy in England. In America, he asserted, the matter of self-identification is important in establishing a successful tragedy; Willy was not great enough for the tragic hero. In fact according to Mr. Brown, "Loman's silly encouragement of his boys to be 'sports' which turns one of them into a seedy seducer and the other into a drifting lawbreaker, is perhaps, less intelligible in England than elsewhere..."[76]

Herbert J. Muller in his book The Spirit of Tragedy maintained Death of a Salesman represented a different kind of a tragedy; the study of a little man succumbing to his environment, rather than a great man destroyed by his greatness is characteristically modern. There is no grandeur in such a tragedy; the hero may excite pity, but nothing like awe.[77]

Thus, there is great controversy concerning Willy's stature in relation to the tragic hero. This issue will probably never be resolved; the standards that comprise the tragic hero in this respect are so inconsistent that final analysis in this respect will be impossible. Those who take their arguments from Aristotle are correct in assuming the hero must be of a high stature. However, there are critics who maintain that the nature of the hero has changed from the time of Aristotle, and therefore the common

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[75]Ivor Brown, "As London Sees Willy Loman," New York Times Magazine, (August 28, 1949), p. 11.

[76]Ibid.

[77]Muller, pp. 316,317.

man could be the subject of tragedy as well as the noblemen. It is impossible, therefore, to make any judgment as to who is right in this respect; the final judgment must be made according to the standards accepted by one group or the other.

There is, however, one concept of the hero that was advanced by Aristotle and shown in this play. This is the idea that the hero must come to the realization that he had some flaw in his character that had brought him to his destruction. According to Aristotle, "The worst situation is when the personage is with full knowledge....It is odious (through the absence of suffering) untragic....A better situation than that, however, is for the deed (or flaw) to be done in ignorance and the relationship discovered afterwards."[78]

This concept changed little from Aristotle to modern theories; many contemporary critics pointed out that Willy was a perfect representation of this thought. First, Arthur Miller, himself, commented on Willy's final realization of his failure:

> In terms of his character, he has achieved a very powerful piece of knowledge, which is that he is loved by his son, and has been embraced by him and forgiven. In this he has given his existence, so to speak, his fatherhood, for which he has always striven and which until now he could not achieve. That he is unable to take this victory thoroughly to his heart, that it closes the circle for him and propels him to his death is the wage of his sin, which was to have committed himself so completely to the counterfeits of dignity and the false coinage embodied on his idea of success that he can prove his existence only by bestowing 'power' on his posterity; a power deriving from the sale of his last asset, himself, for the price of his insurance policy.[79]

Later, in a sequel to this publication, Miller again clarified this concept of Willy's realization of his failure. He said, "The tragedy of

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[78]Aristotle, Rhetoric and Poetics (New York: Modern Library, 1954), p. 241.

[79]Miller, Collected Plays, p. 34.

Willy Loman is that he gave his life, or sold it, in order to justify the waste of it. It is the tragedy of a man who did believe that he alone was not meeting the qualifications laid down for mankind by these clean-shaven frontiersmen who inhabit the peaks of broadcasting and advertising offices."[80]

In addition to Miller's views, further comment was advanced by Sighle Kennedy in an article in the Catholic World. He said that Biff spoke the final words of his father when he, himself, said, "I'm nothing!" At least this was the beginning of Willy's wisdom.[81]

It can be said that Willy Loman resembled his predecessors in that his destruction came after his realization of his mistaken ideals. In Death of a Salesman Willy tried to redeem himself in the eyes of his family by giving them the only thing he had--his life. He realizes that only after his death will his family have the money to build a future for themselves.

The controversy over this play is justified in the sense there are no clear, identifiable ideals or rules which determine the tragic hero. The contemporary critics are at a loss to define the rules that were laid down by Aristotle and other ancient critics. Because of the lack of consistency set forth in the standards, they are open to criticisms of all critics. The basic question is, however, how much must we depend on ancient critics for contemporary standards. Those who agreed with Aristotle appeared to do so because they had no other guide for their theories. It seems they were forced to accept the opinions of the ancient

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[80]Arthur Miller, "The Salesman has a Birthday", New York Times, (February 5, 1950), p. 3.

[81]Sighle Kennedy, "Who Killed the Salesman?" Catholic World CLXXI (May, 1960), p. 115.

critics and could not accept the difference found in this play. Others, however, including Miller, Anderson, Eric Bentley, and John Mason Brown have not accepted the goals of Aristotle as the final guides for their observations. Times have changed since Aristotle formulated his hypotheses of tragedy; as times change ideals change also. In many areas this was shown by the reviews of this play; however many have not changed significantly on the other hand as was shown in many of the treatises dealt with in this paper.

In determining the nature of Willy Loman in the final analysis several things must be observed. Throughout history many standards have remained constant. The idea that a tragic hero must be brought to his destruction by some error in character or judgment seems to remain much the same; the hero must come to an unhappy ending; the hero should come to the realization of his error; the tragic hero should arouse pity or fear in those who watch him fall to his destruction; the hero should be consistent with himself. All of these were clearly evident in Willy. The only major difference was in the discussion of Willy's stature or position in society. Thus, some standards must be evaluated and accepted or rejected. For example, if Aristotle's belief that to be tragic one must be great is accepted, Willy cannot be a tragic hero; he lacks the position given to Oedipus and King Lear. If, on the other had, concepts have changed and the common man can be the subject of a tragedy, he is definitely a tragic character.

This play was chosen because of its controversial nature. It is a representation of a modern tragedy that differs from its ancient predecessors, but, perhaps, so have the concepts of tragedy changed from ancient predecessors.

This writer feels the whole controversy as to the nature of the tragic hero is best summed up by Richard Sewall in his book, Vision of Tragedy when he describes the modern tragic hero:

> "...This new tragic hero has not the satisfaction of a clear and present opponent-an unjust deity, a plague- astricken city, an ungrateful daughter, an oppressing social and religious code, or a Moby Dick. He struggles not so much with a crisis as with a condition, and the condition is the contemporary confusion of values and the dilemma in his own soul. He does not shape events in bold strokes; rather events to a greater extent shape him...the tendency (is) to call him pathetic rather than tragic; a victim rather than a hero.[82]

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[82]Sewall, p. 110.

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